

Message Text

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TAGS: MPOL, MCAP, NATO, UK

SUBJECT: UK DEFENSE CUTS - MASON STATEMENT IN COMMONS

13 JANUARY 1976

REF: (A) LONDON 350; (B) LONDON 611

SUMMARY: ANSWERING QUESTIONS IN COMMONS ON 13 JANUARY, MASON GAVE A CLEAR PUBLIC INDICATION THAT HE BELIEVES HIS BATTLE WITH HEALEY HAS BEEN WON AND THAT THE BURDEN OF FORTHCOMING NEW DEFENSE CUTS WILL FALL ON TAIL AND NOT TEETH. IN LENGTHY EXCHANGES, MASON CAME UNDER HEAVY OPPOSITION PRESSURE NOT TO MAKE ANY FURTHER DEFENSE CUTS; AT THE SAME TIME LABOR PARTY LEFT-WINGERS STRONGLY URGED MASON TO REDUCE THE UK'S DEFENSE COMMITMENT IN KEEPING WITH THE PARTY'S MANIFESTO. MASON EXPRESSED CONFIDENCE THAT THE NEW CUTS WOULD NOT AFFECT BRITAIN'S NATO COMMITMENTS. END SUMMARY

1. SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENSE, ROY MASON, ANSWERING QUESTIONS IN THE COMMONS ON 13 JANUARY 1976. TOLD THE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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HOUSE HE IS NOT PREPARED TO ACCEPT DEFENSE CUTS WHICH

WOULD JEOPARDIZE THE SECURITY OF THE WESTERN ALLIANCE. IF DEFENSE SPENDING HAD TO BE AFFECTED DURING THE CURRENT REVIEW OF PUBLIC EXPENDITURE, MASON DECLARED EMPHATICALLY THAT IT WOULD BE HIS DUTY TO OPPOSE SUCH CUTS. OPPOSITION MPS PRESSED MASON FOR A PLEDGE THAT HE WOULD RESIGN RATHER THAN ACCEPT FURTHER CUTS. MASON REFUSED TO BE DRAWN THAT FAR. HE DECLARED, HOWEVER, THAT IF CUTS WOULD JEOPARDIZE THE SECURITY OF THE WESTERN ALLIANCE "I WOULD NOT ACCEPT IT." IN REPLY TO GEORGE YOUNGER'S (OPPOSITION SPOKESMAN ON DEFENSE) REMINDER THAT DURING LAST YEAR'S DEFENSE REVIEW MASON AND THE DEFENSE STAFF HAD SAID THAT DEFENSE COULD NOT BE FURTHER CUT WITH SAFETY, MASON SAID THAT UNTIL THE PUBLIC EXPENDITURE REVIEW EXERCISE IS COMPLETED, HE COULD NOT GIVE CATEGORIC ASSURANCE NOW ABOUT HOW FAR THE CUTS WILL GO. BUT, MASON SAID "YOU CAN REST ASSURED THAT IT IS MY INTENTION TO TRY TO MAINTAIN TO THE FULL THE COMMITMENT WE HAVE MADE TO OUR NATO ALLIANCE."

2. COMMENT: ALL THE QUALITY DAILIES GAVE PROMINENT PLAY TO THE MASON QTATEMENTS UNDER SUCH HEADLINES AS "DEFENSE SECRETARY TO MAKE SURE FURTHER CUTS DO NOT IMPINGE ON UK COMMITMENTS TO NATO,(THE TIMES); "MASON WANTS TO MAINTAIN NATO COMMITMENT" (THE FINANCIAL TIMES); "DEFENSE PLEDGE BY MASON" (DAILY TELEGRAPH);AND "MASON AXE OVER CIVIL SERVICE" (THE GUARDIAN). IT IS EVIDENT FROM THE REPORT- INQ THAT MASOL'S MOOD IN COMMONS REFLECTED THE OPTIMISM WE DETECTED IN OUR RECENT DISCUSSIONS WITH HMG OFFICIALS THAT THE SOLID SUPPORT OF THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE FOREIQN SECRETARY HAD ENABLED MASON TO BLUNT THE TREAS- URY'S ORIQINAL REQUEST (THAT 500 MILLION OOUNDS PLUS BE CUT FROM 1978/79 DEFENSE EXPENDITURES).

3. FULL HANSARD TEXT OF DEBATE WILL BE POUCHED WHEN AVAILABLE.

RICHARDSON

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